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BEFORE AND AFTER "JAWS": CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF SHARK ATTACKS

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BEFORE AND AFTER *JAWS*:

CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF SHARK ATTACKS

When Peter Benchley wrote the novel *Jaws* in 1974, about a rogue shark that terrorised a small seaside island community, he admitted that very little was known about sharks.[1] The following year Steven Spielberg's film of the same name was released and generated an unprecedented audience response of excitement and terror.[2] As a result, the idea of marauding sharks became entrenched in the psyche of bathers around the world creating a fear that the media exploited.[3] A further impact of the film is described by Stephan Lovgren, writing for the *National Geographic News* in 2005, when he quotes George Burgess, shark biologist at the University of Florida in Gainesville, as saying that shark populations in the United States plunged when thousands of fishers attempted to catch trophy sharks after seeing *Jaws*. Moreover, thirty years after the release of the film, Lovgren claimed that the perception that sharks were 'stalking, killing machines' remains in the public's psyche.[4]

The *Jaws* image of the great white shark (*Carcharodoncarcharias*) still persists in the public mind today and, as this article will argue, the media remain committed to exploiting the fear that it embodies whenever there is a shark incident. Dr Rory McAuley, shark expert with the Department of Fisheries, Government of Western Australia (Fisheries WA) asserts that the film *Jaws* is the seminal point for most media responses and the histrionic reporting reinforces popular images of great whites as man-eating predators. He quite rightly points out that shark attacks do not need this form of hype because people are interested anyway.[5] Reports on shark attacks in several Australian newspapers confirm Dr McAuley's observation of media hype. For example, as recently as 2 April 2012, after a shark fatality near Bunbury,

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approximately 200 kilometres south of Perth in Western Australia, *The West Australian* reported on its front page that WA was the deadliest place in the world for shark attacks. This was followed by two inside pages devoted to the number of attacks over the last two years and an article by shark hunter Hugh Edwards declaring that the 'Killer may be a rogue predator'.[6]

While the film *Jaws* (and the media) undoubtedly did damage to shark populations, it also produced significant public and scientific interest in the animals. The media responded by increasing the number of science-related articles. As funding for shark research increased, it enabled scientists and conservationists to develop a much greater understanding of the vital role that sharks play in the marine ecology. Although after each shark incident the public remain vulnerable to media hype and the *Jaws* image, there is now a greater understanding and empathy for the animal that many still fear.

Pre *Jaws*

Until recently, much of the history of sharks was based on myth and sea lore. Ancient sea-farers fervently believed in sea monsters and serpents that were lurking in the gloomy depths of the world's oceans; they filled their charts and maps with hideous creatures that had features both real and imagined.[7] Sailors told terrifying tales, and the stories and superstitions were passed down through the ages. As swimming gradually became an acceptable form of recreation, the average bather knew or cared little about sharks and the tales became accepted as simply sailors' lore and legends.[8]

Writing in 1940, Gilbert P. Whitley, who at the time was the ichthyologist at the Australian Museum, commented in his book, *The Fishes of Australia, Part 1, Sharks &c.*, that apart from Australians, there were many people in the world who did not believe that sharks attacked people.[9] He concluded that in Australia, 'we have very little to fear from sharks' and observed that the larger and more dangerous species of shark, (one could assume that he was referring to the great white), do not frequent Australian beaches as a rule.[10] He was joined in this view by Dr Victor Coppleson, one of Australia's most respected shark specialists of the period, who claimed in his 1958 book *Shark Attack* that despite the evidence of sharks attacking people going back

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more than 2000 years, there was still an overwhelming number of disbelieving people.[11]

During the 1900s, it was generally believed in the United States that sharks were harmless. But in 1916, America was stunned by a series of shark attacks at Beach Haven, New Jersey, that saw four people killed and one severely wounded over a terrifying period of twelve days. Newspapers such as the *New York Times, The New York Herald* and the *New York World* headlined the terror of the shark attacks across their front pages spreading hysteria and fear, claiming that the whole of the east coast was infested with man-eating monsters. America was in the grip of a shark panic as never before.[12] Twelve months later WWI replaced public interest and newspaper headlines and sharks were once more relegated to mariners' stories.

In Australia from 1919, when the end of the Great War saw a relaxation of many previous bathing taboos, surfing became widely popular. Around that time, sharks were not considered a serious problem at Sydney beaches. That changed in February 1922, when lifesaver Milton Coughlan was attacked and killed. One month later a second fatality was followed by two more attacks within the next two years.[13] These four shark attacks at Coogee, all within a distance of little more than a mile, created a great deal of public alarm and forced the authorities to consider establishing protective measures. Look-out towers were erected on the beaches, surf lifesaving clubs organised shark watches, shark alarm bells were used for the first time and harpoons became standard equipment in surf boats.[14]

By 1934, with continuing attacks, the public had begun to lose confidence in bathing. As a consequence, the government of New South Wales set up a special Shark Menace Advisory Committee to investigate the problem. Due to intense lobbying by the Surf Life Saving Association, the main recommendation was that the 'Government should subsidise systematic and continuous meshing along the metropolitan coastline.'[15] Despite many detractors, the Government adopted the recommendation in 1937 and meshing was successfully introduced off the metropolitan beaches.

With the advent of WWII, stories of shark attacks on downed servicemen, prompted the Office of Naval Research within the United States Navy to plan a 'research strategy for development of an effective

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repellent.'[16] In 1958, the Shark Research Panel, consisting of a working group of shark researchers, initiated The Shark Attack File. It was the first such attempt to comprehensively document attacks on a global, historical basis.[17] The same year, 1958, Victor Coppleson developed the 'rogue shark' theory. Dr Coppleson believed that,

> A rogue shark…like the man-eating tiger, is a killer which, having experienced the deadly sport of killing or mauling a human, goes in search of similar game…attacks have…occurred many miles apart along the path of a cruising 'rogue'. It may seem fantastic to suggest that attacks up to and even beyond 50 miles apart can be due to the same shark, but there is strong evidence to indicate this.[18]

Although Dr Coppleson's theory has since been refuted, the idea of a 'rogue shark' remains firmly planted in popular belief even today and is a common term favoured by the media.

Post *Jaws*

The film *Jaws* opened on 20 June 1975 and grossed $7,061,573 in its first three days. Director Steven Spielberg's film had movie-goers paralysed with fear.[19] Suddenly, man-eating sharks appeared to be everywhere. The theory of rogue sharks seemed to be a reality and around the world few bathers could take to the water without failing to recall John William's ominous soundtrack as the great white prepared to attack.[20]

When the film was released, there was a surge of public attention in sharks especially in the US. Interest became so intense that the film was followed by four more *Jaws* sequels and decades of graphic film and television imagery of sharks and shark attacks. *Jaws* had triggered what George Burgess, described as 'A collective testosterone rush… [that] swept through the East Coast of the U.S.'[21] As a consequence, a plethora of shark fishing tournaments sprang up. It wasn't necessary to have a big boat or expensive tackle to take part. The average fisherman could catch a big fish, firm in the belief they were catching man-eaters, a practice that dramatically reduced many shark species over the ensuing decades. 'The movie helped initiate that decline by making it sexy to go catch sharks,' says Burgess.[22] The accompanying sensationalist media accounts of sharks as man-eaters reinforced the fear of 'an attack' in the mind of the general public.[23]

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Sharks and shark hunters had suddenly become a bankable commodity for the media that was guaranteed to attract the public interest. An example of this was demonstrated in the December 1975 *Sunday Independent* which headlined 'MONSTER SHARKS THAT HAUNT ALBANY'. Across the front page was a picture of shark hunter Ray Ruby with the massive head of a 'deadly man eating' shark he had caught. Inside, under a subheading of 'Shark killer fears death', were pictures of two immense sharks he had killed. In the accompanying article, he claimed that he had seen men off Albany who were looking for sharks bigger than their boats.[24]

In 1987 an article appeared about sharks in *The Sydney Morning Herald* under the heading 'A perfect killing machine'. The article described how the word 'shark' on the front page of a newspaper immediately stimulates people's fear, regardless of years of shark-free surfing. It concluded that there is no other substitute for a word that can arouse such terror. But, the article admitted, 'they want you scared because fear sells.'[25] By 1990 John West, director of the Australian Shark Attack File at Taronga Zoo, was complaining that the public was getting very little correct information about sharks. He blamed media hysteria for the fear in the public mind. He also added that Australia had an undeserved worldwide reputation as a country of shark attacks due to well-publicised incidents from the 1930s to the 1950s. Yet, considering Australians' love of the water, the frequency of attacks was very low.[26]

In April 1996 a shark attack in Sydney Harbour, the first in the harbour for 33 years, triggered a plethora of media shark articles. According to Dr John Paxton, Principal Research Scientist in the Fish Section of the Australian Museum, many of the articles were sensationalist and imbalanced, most of them emphasising the dangers of sharks. Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald,* he said that: 'Our fear of sharks was used to sell newspapers, magazines, and television programs'.[27] However, he accepted that media reports on sharks have become more balanced. There were more articles on conservation, 'but, [he wrote] when an attack occurs, a media "feeding frenzy" may result, as followed two fatalities within a week in 1993.' He was adamant that there was 'a need to report the facts and to point out the danger, however small…but we have been swimming in Sydney Harbour for decades.'[28]

Dr Paxton's criticism was justified when inflammatory articles

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appeared in Sydney's *The Daily News* in December 1996. The paper reported on the state government of New South Wales decision to protect the great white shark (*Carcharodoncarcharias).* Under the provocative headings of 'Killer shark protected from people' and 'Jail for killing great whites', the articles described the animals as 'marine predators', 'one of nature's most efficient killing machines' and 'the most likely to attack people'.[29] In a challenge to the successful efforts by government and shark conservationists to protect the species, renowned professional shark hunter Vic Hislop immediately criticised the decision and said, 'For a government to protect something that can tear your children apart in seconds is brainless.'[30] Consequently, the main tone of the articles was not the importance of the government's decision but rather the danger of the ruling.

In Western Australia, Perth beaches saw a fatal attack in 1925 at Cottesloe Beach and a near fatal attack at City Beach in 1947.[31] Nevertheless by the sixties, Perth metropolitan beaches were generally thought to be safer than other swimming beaches, such as in Sydney, yet the measures taken by lifesavers to protect against attacks suggest that some fears were held.[32] Confidence was shaken in October 1997 when there was a white pointer shark attack on Brian Sierakowski and Barney Hanrahan, two high profile West Australians, in the waters off Cottesloe beach. The attack received intense media attention locally, nationally and internationally. *The West Australian* newspaper called it a 'rogue' shark attack and in what appeared to be an attempt to connect two attacks to one shark, reported that a white pointer was also seen in the area of a shark attack in 1995 south of Esperance. Nevertheless, the article included a statement by a scientist from Fisheries WA which said that white pointer sharks were common off Perth beaches but seldom attacked people.[33] In this instance, even the national paper, *The Australian,* whose reporting style is usually more conservative, resorted to emotive terminology when it commented on the 'angry, hungry shark.'[34] According to Karin Becker, Professor of Visual Studies and Pedagogy of Stockholm University, this style of:

> ...sensational journalism breaks the press ascribed guidelines of ethical practice with the intention of attracting attention in order to sell more papers...a component common to the various constructions of the sensationalism is that attracting attention takes precedence over the other journalistic values, including accuracy, credibility and political or social significance.[35]

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Nevertheless, a more positive focus on sharks and the vulnerable status of the animals has gradually emerged from the media. Often, articles on the biology and ecology of sharks are interspersed with the hysteria. In June 1999, in an article in *The Australian,* shark expert Jon Stevens from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) was interviewed and he described the great white as a 'much maligned animal'. While he agreed that white sharks are dangerous, he dismissed the image portrayed by the film *Jaws* and TV documentaries as misleading. He said that most of the times when they are swimming around a boat, great white sharks are not aggressive.[36]

The idea that great whites are not aggressive apparently did not impress Matthew Horan of Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph.* In April 2000, under a graphic heading, 'The danger lurking beyond Sydney's beautiful beaches', he reported that:

> The monsters of the deep have been trying out our shallow waters for size, alarming swimmers, lifesavers and scientists…Sydney's Indian summer has brought a few unwelcome guests. While crowds flock to the beaches to enjoy the last rays of the sun – only 50m away, in some cases – are the sharks.[37]

He said that, while sharks had always been a feature of Sydney's beaches, surf life savers claimed that there had been an increase in shark sightings and that sharks were 'coming in a lot closer' than previously. In an obvious reference to *Jaws* images, his article contended that, 'Shark nets are humanity's last line of defence against the monsters of the deep, and they have been working overtime this year.'[38]

In contrast, in May 2000 Adelaide's *The Advertiser* published an article 'Swimming with sharks' by shark conservationist and spear fisherman Rodney Fox who survived a horrific shark attack in 1963. After the attack, Fox went on to become a strong advocate of shark protection. He admits that at first he killed a number of sharks trying to prove to the public that there was an effective way of protecting oneself while exploring the 'wonderful underwater world'. Over the years he filmed his expeditions, all the while becoming increasingly uncomfortable with killing sharks. His knowledge and films gained Hollywood's attention and he spent six weeks filming great whites at Dangerous Reef. A small segment of his film became part of Steven Spielberg's film *Jaws.* In the article, Fox detailed his attack, but the over-all emphasis of the article

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was how much he learned about sharks and how important they are to the diversity of the marine environment. [39]

Around this time, *Jaws* author Peter Benchley was in Australia promoting his shark conservation message. He was concerned that 'in the 25 years since *Jaws* was first released, sharks have experienced an unprecedented and uncontrolled attack'.[40] Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph* could not resist heading Benchley's interview on 11 July 2000 with 'Jaws has a friendly mouthpiece'. Eleven days later, in a complete turnaround, the paper was warning of 'Shark attack danger', quoting notorious shark hunter Vic Hislop who declared that 'protecting great whites will lead to a surge in shark attacks.'[41] Even the *Sunday Mail* found it difficult to promote a positive spin on an interview with Jean-Michel Cousteau. The headline 'Swimming with monsters – Giant man-eaters just misunderstood' certainly did not relay the message that sharks were not the bloodthirsty creatures of the movies Cousteau was trying to convey.[42]

Then in September 2000, two surfers were taken by sharks off the South Australian coast within two days just 250 kilometres apart. Honeymooner Cameron Bayes, 25, was camping with his wife at Cactus Beach when he was taken 50 metres from shore. Two days later, 17-year-old surfer Jevan Wright was attacked and killed and the media reflected the shock of the communities. Newspapers such as *The Australian* and *The Advertiser* were respectfully restrained after the first attack, while the *Herald Sun* maintained that 'Killers lurk in surfing heaven.'[43] But after the second attack, the front page of *The Weekend Australian* declared that 'Signs pointed to shark horror'.[44] *The Australian* countered with less dramatic language: 'Second fatal shark attack'. Nevertheless, it used a distressing picture of the remains of Wright's surfboard and several highly descriptive articles on the two attacks.[45]

The following day, *The Australian* again featured a full-length article on sharks in our waters. The article concentrated on the science and the decline of sharks, but with the predictable picture of a fearsome, open-mouthed great white.[46] Indeed, Bob Franklin's analysis of 'corporate manipulation and unseen censorship' of the British media in his book *Newzakand News Media*, (1997) considered that, 'Entertainment

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has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism.'[47]

This was never more evident than in Western Australia, when on 6 November 2000, well-respected businessman Ken Crew was attacked and killed and his friend mauled by a great white at Cottesloe, one of Perth's most popular beaches. The media hysteria that followed intensified a public panic that was at an all-time high.[48] The idea of a shark attack on WA beaches appeared to be straight from the *Jaws* movie and drove the media into an excited frenzy.

Within minutes of the attack at 6.30am, media helicopters were over the scene and by 10.10am Channel Seven had broadcast the terrible news. Radio talk-back shows were inundated with opinionated callers and the day after the attack the nation woke to a print media circus. Under histrionic headlines, details of the horrific tragedy were spread over several pages of the nation's major and community papers as journalists sought to capture the lurid and graphic details of the attack.[49]

The West Australian carried a full-page photograph, ostensibly the moment rescuers pulled Ken Crew from the water overlaid by the graphic banner 'SHARK ATTACK' on its front page.[50] Inside were two articles, 'Siren of fear hits home'[51] and 'Shoot-to-kill order goes out to patrols.'[52] The first was an emotional story from journalist Robbie Burns who was part of the early morning surf ski crowd and was on the beach with friends at the time of the attack. His highly charged article described their reaction after the shark alarm went off and they realised there was no one in the water and that a large group had gathered on the beach.

> In those brief moments those of us who swim and paddle from North Cott every morning lost our innocence. We won't ever again take for granted our right to be in the ocean. Three years ago those involved with the shark attack at South Cottesloe agreed they should get back out on their skis the next day – a bit like climbing straight back on a horse after you've been thrown. But this is different. The mind-numbing horror of this attack, and the tragic consequences, will affect forever those who were there.[53]

The Australian was equally shocked and enticed its readers with a true-*Jaws* format. Its front page story was 'Shark hunters licensed to kill'. Inside was a two page spread using the same photograph of Ken

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Crew being dragged ashore as used by *The West* with accompanying editorials such as 'A scream and blood in the sea', 'Air, sea hunt for man-eater, Survivors relive the horror' and 'Seaside culture shattered in fatal seconds'.[54] Local community papers such as the *Post* and the *News Chronicle, Community* also devoted most of their attention to the attack. *News Chronicle* carried a front page banner, 'Killer shark alert' and a photograph of the beach closed sign overlaid on a picture of a traumatised witness.[55]

The following day, Wednesday 8 November, *The West Australian* was still consumed with the shark attack as its lead story. Page one was devoted to the heroic rescue of Ken Crew. Inside were stories on the memorial ceremony and details of the Fisheries patrol's unsuccessful attempts to find 'the killer' and a shark information article on 'why sharks are heading for shore' - an unfortunate caption for already nervous beach-goers.[56] On Saturday, 11 November, regardless of the fact that Fisheries experts had dismissed the idea of a serial or rogue killer as a dangerous myth, the *POST* ran a hysterical front page headline raising the possibility that the Cottesloe shark could be a serial killer.[57] Shark fever gripped Perth and there was a sense that things would never be the same. In the local magazine *Perth Weekly*, author Robert Drewe, who grew up on the West Australian coast, wrote a deeply personal article 'The day it all changed'.[58]

In response to public fears, the government brought together representatives from various government departments, Surf Life Saving Association, and Cottesloe and Stirling councils and developed the Shark Hazard Committee (SHC). [59] The SHC established and were responsible for the Shark Incident Emergency Response Plan in order to deal with shark attack mitigation and Fisheries WA was to be the lead agency.[60]

Media and changing public attitudes

Throughout 2001, shark articles and letters continued to appear in the national and local print media as the debate between public safety and shark conservation raged back and forth. On the other side of the world in the United States, sharks were also on everyone's mind. Two days after the Fourth of July, 8-year-old Jessie Arbogast was attacked by a bull shark in knee-deep water in Pensacola, Florida. From then

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on, an increasing number of shark attacks, two of them fatal, began making headlines in the United States.[61] As public hysteria grew, *Time Magazine* was calling it 'The Summer of the Shark'.[62] *The Sunday Times* in WA reported that, '*Jaws* hysteria has hit the US':

> ...near-fatal encounters and dozens of biting incidents in a spate that has started a media blitz. The *New York Daily News* front-page screamed '*Jaws*' on Tuesday and even the seriously minded *Time* magazine devoted a cover to sharks. Television footage of packs of sharks off the coast of Florida and graphic accounts by survivors dominated the evening news...[63]

Media coverage grew more manic. Even CNN admitted that Miami state tourism officials had told them that since the Jessie Arbogast attack they had 'received 100 calls from reporters about sharks – but only one call from a concerned tourist.'[64] Despite the fatal attacks and several shark incidents, George Burgess, director of the International Shark Attack Files, insisted that the number of shark attacks was down for 2001. He said that the problem was 'a media frenzy, not a feeding frenzy.'[65]

Back in Western Australia on the afternoon of 10 July 2004, 29-year-old surfer Bradley Smith was attacked and killed by what was thought to be two sharks at Gracetown, a popular holiday town 280 km from Perth in the South West. The media frenzy that followed was similar in hysteria to the 2000 Ken Crew attack. *The Sunday Times* claimed that there had been a 'spate of attacks' and Fisheries WA organised a patrol boat to search for the sharks, with the authority to shoot to kill.[66] *The West Australian* was warning that, 'Man eaters likely to swim free' although Dr Rory McAuley, had explained it was almost impossible to identify the exact sharks that had been involved in the attack.

Nevertheless, columnist and fishing writer Mike Roennfeldt was demanding that 'Sharks that take human life need to be killed',[67] apparently disregarding Bradley Smith's brother Stephen's plea for the shark to be spared.[68] *The Sunday Times* did not appear interested in saving the shark either. Again the '*Jaws* format' reporting surfaced. The use of provocative language such as 'rogue sharks', 'monster' and 'death from the deep' were once more in the headings of articles that dominated the paper. According to one article, in an extraordinary claim, Sydney shark hunter Vic Hislop said it was the same shark that had been killing people around Perth and that 'the larger shark was "training" the

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smaller shark to attack humans'.[69] Concerned that the *Jaws* myth of a rogue shark was still being promulgated, Dr Rory McAuley dismissed the shark hunter's claim.

> ...Mr McAuley said there was no evidence sharks hunted for humans. "There is almost no scientific evidence that a shark that has been involved in an attack on a human will return to the same area again or indeed will continue to attack humans", he said."A taste for humans is really the stuff of fiction and has come about by the deep impact that the movie *Jaws* had."[70]

The article said that Fisheries WA had sought a media analysis of public sentiment on the 'kill-or-be-killed' argument.[71] It was revealed that 'Smith's death was raised 4000 times in the media over a ten-day period; 21 per cent of comments favoured the shark's preservation, while 4 per cent favoured destruction (76 per cent were neutral).'[72] The same percentage of pro-shark preservation was also reflected after the death of Ken Crew.[73]

After the hysterical media coverage following the attacks of Ken Crew and Bradley Smith, Dr McAuley said that there was a tangible change and a reduction in reporting hype. Over that period, he had established a working relationship with journalists who had become more aware of the science behind sharks and shark attacks. Unfortunately, he said they had since been replaced by a new breed of journalists who have reverted back to the standard *Jaws* format of hysterical reporting.[74]

When another fatal shark attack occurred in December2004 off a popular Adelaide beach, *The Weekend Australian* reported that 18-year-old surfer Nick Peterson's mates 'demand revenge on the killer shark'.[75] The victim's father, however, asked for the shark to be spared, a sentiment that was increasingly emerging from the families of victims and from the victims themselves.[76] Another fatal attack occurred in 2005. This time, 26-year-old Geoffrey Brazier, skipper of a luxury catamaran, was taken in the waters off the Abrolhos Islands. Confirming Dr McAuley's comments on the return to '*Jaws* hype', a week after the attack, *The Sunday Times* claimed that 'Shark attacks are on the rise and WA waters are among the most dangerous in Australia'.[77]

Media hype had increased to a level that Dr McAuley had cause to strongly respond to a claim by journalist Bret Christian who wrote an article in the 26 March 2005 *Cambridge Post,* proclaiming the existence of a 'rogue shark'. In the article, and in previous articles,

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Christian argued that it was possible the same shark was responsible for the three previous fatal attacks in Western Australia and the Brian Sierakowski's surf ski attack. Mr Christian based his hypothesis on the story of a series of five shark attacks that occurred in New Jersey in 1916. Dr McAuley replied that shark attack researchers now generally attribute these attacks to multiple sharks, not an individual. He rejected the suggestion that a single shark was responsible in the WA attacks and added that as most victims are not eaten, it dispels the shark's motive as a predator. Dr McAuley said what seems to be lost in the shark hype is the fact that sharks eat fish and as they get bigger, they move to seals; but the constant in their diet is fish.[78]

After 51-year-old Brian Guest was attacked and killed in December 2008 at Port Kennedy, just south of Perth, while snorkelling with his son, *The Sunday Times* claimed that there had been a 'Decade of fear off WA's fatal shores.'[79] Two weeks later 13-year-old Hanna Mighall was seriously hurt after a shark attack on Tasmania's east coast. The media around the world was calling the attack 'like a scene from *Jaws'*,[80] as was the normally moderate ABC.[81] As Bob Franklin again points out, the exploitation of 'personal tragedy for public spectacle is increasingly commonplace'.[82] In the US, *Time* was proclaiming that 'Sharks rampage in Australia'[83] and *Fox News* declared that 'Recent Shark Attacks [had sparked] Hysteria in Australia'.[84] *The West Australian* reported that one of Australia's most experienced shark experts and author, Hugh Edwards, was calling for the 'rogue shark' to be hunted down and killed. Fisheries WA said this would only be carried out on the protected species as a last resort. Yet in a reflection of a growing social attitude, Brian Guest's 24-year-old son Daniel said that his father loved the ocean and would not have wanted the shark hunted and destroyed.[85]

Over the years, *Jaws* has been the touchstone for media reporting. Reference to the movie and use of highly descriptive language, such as 'man-eater', 'monster of the deep', 'predator', especially in the print media, has continued to describe shark incidents regardless of the severity of the encounter. For example, in 2009 after 31 year-old Jonathon Beard was attacked off the northern NSW coast, headlines such as 'Attack like 'Jaws' movie',[86]'How I beat monster of the deep – Surfer lifted out of water and shaken, like in a 'Jaws' movie,'[87]and, 'It was like a Jaws movie, says victim',[88]were appearing in various newspapers around the

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country. It would appear that despite the infrequency of shark attacks, when one does occur, *Jaws* remains the benchmark for the media.

Conservation post *Jaws*

Scientists and conservationists have held the movie *Jaws* responsible for decades of fear of shark attacks. Peter Benchley, writer of the book on which the film was based, spent the remainder of his days promoting conservation of the animal he once demonized.[89] The film has been blamed for the surge in shark game fishing, shark tournaments in the U.S. and worldwide overfishing that has devastated shark populations. But the film was also responsible for a flood of scientific interest in sharks, and an expansion of shark conservation groups around the world. All were anxious to advance awareness of the importance of sharks in marine ecology, to raise the alarm over the plunging shark populations and to protect the endangered species.

Just as the interest in killing sharks increased after *Jaws,* so too did the world-wide interest in saving sharks. After the death of her husband Peter Benchley, Wendy Benchley continued his conservation work. She joined the Humane Society of the United States in condemning shark fishing tournaments, saying they added to the depletion of sharks. She admitted that *Jaws* scared people but it also inspired. 'We received letters from scientists who became oceanographers because of *Jaws*... Richard Dreyfuss was a role model for those who went into the ocean sciences. They said they never knew it could be so exciting.'[90]

Commercial fishing for sharks has caused a catastrophic decline in shark populations in the waters off the eastern seaboard in the United States, much of the decline due to sharks being caught as by-catch when fishermen take other fish. Many shark species have dropped by 50 per cent and some have fallen by 90 per cent.[91] However, the increased interest in sharks has also seen an increase in government funding for research. Explosive growth in shark fishing created a need to closely monitor shark populations. In 1994, the Florida Museum of Natural History and the fishers of the United States Atlantic commercial shark fishery developed a cooperative shark research program, known as the Commercial Shark Fishery Observer Program. After the intense media hype over the shark attacks in 2001 and pressure from shark scientists over the plunging shark populations, the U.S. Congress passed a bill

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providing $1.5 million annually to fund new research programs.[92]

The widespread practice of shark finning exacerbated the decline in shark populations. Shark finning is the inhumane way of removing the fin from the shark while it is still alive. The body is then thrown overboard and the shark faces a slow, painful death and drowns.[93] The demand for shark-fin soup is one of the most serious threats to sharks around the world, driving several shark populations to the brink of extinction.[94] The practice is banned in many countries including Australia and the United States. Unfortunately, on the high seas, there is no effective regulation and shark finning is causing a massive depletion in species. Most disturbing, because of their slow reproduction, is the taking of the larger sharks.[95]

Growing concern by environmentalists and the scientific community in Australia over the decline in shark populations, in particular the great white and its very slow recovery rate, resulted in the Federal Government introducing legislation in 1997 that protected the great white and also the endangered grey nurse shark (*Carchariastaurus*).[96] An additional pressure on shark species in Australian waters is the protective shark meshing on the Sydney and Queensland beaches. These have been severely criticised by environmentalists and scientists alike for the damage they cause not just sharks, but to other marine life. In an article in the Australian Museum's *Nature Australia,* research fellow in ichthyology Dr John Paxton expressed his concern over the destructive nets. He demanded, 'How many more sharks and other animals must be killed before beach meshing is removed?'[97] He explained that:

> ...it is a common misconception that shark nets physically prevent sharks from entering the shallow waters. The nets, which are set on the bottom, do not reach the surface and are open at both ends, so sharks swim over and around them. Those that try to swim through them (from either direction!) become entangled and immobilised in the wide mesh, and 'drown'. Thus the only purpose of shark nets – to reduce the population sizes of sharks and thus the threat to swimmers.[98]

According to the Australian Marine Conservation Society, 100 million sharks are killed each year around the world, and shark numbers have declined by 90 per cent. In Australia, shark flesh is considered low value compared with other fish and sold as cheap fish under names such as flake or trope.[99] Since 2001, the Australian Fisheries Management

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Authority has recognised the dwindling shark populations by imposing substantial restrictions, gear modifications and fishing ground closures to reduce the take of school shark.[100]

In the past, the fear of shark attack attracted a great deal of research that aimed at protecting humans. However, recent research has shown that the fear of possible shark attack does not deter people from entering the water.[101]

> The lack of science-based solutions to eliminate the risk of shark attacks on humans has not stopped people using the ocean…at least in Australian waters, ocean use has increased dramatically, and as a result the incidence of attacks, relative to total population, has increased over the past 20 years. This suggests that the fear that society once had for sharks has decreased, and with it has come a change in attitude towards sharks.[102]

The change in perception of sharks and recognition of the significant role that sharks play in the marine ecology, has led to a realisation that there is a need for better management practices. Furthermore, this has created an increase in people interested in research and a rise in resources to support the research.[103] Critical for the success of conservation management is research into industries that exploit sharks, human communities that depend on them and changing environmental conditions including climate change.[104] What is most vital to conservation management, however, is research into the status of species to identify those at risk. For instance, there are currently no accurate estimates for any populations of white sharks around the world.[105]

Conclusion

The media has played a dominant role in shaping attitudes towards shark conservation, shark attack representations and government policies around the world. When Steven Spielberg's film *Jaws* about a 'rogue shark' was released in 1975, very little was known about sharks and the media exploited the public fear that it evoked for commercial gain. The media hype of sharks and shark incidents gave rise to an explosion of shark hunters, shark game fishing, shark tournaments, shark artefact sales and commercial fishing. The result was a plunge in shark populations worldwide. Appalled by the repercussions, Peter Benchley, writer of the book on which the film was based, spent the remainder of his days promoting conservation of the animal he once

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demonized.

The film was also responsible for a surge in scientific interest and understanding of the importance of sharks and their environment. The efforts of scientists and conservationists to raise the alarm over the plunging shark populations have led to a change in media attitude. As shark populations have declined, science-related articles in the media increased. Many journalists are giving more attention to reporting on the diminishing shark populations and to the sharks' important role in healthy oceans. Increasing human interactions with the natural marine environment and more science-based information from the media has changed social perceptions of sharks from fear to conservation. Consequently, public awareness and subsequent pressure has had an influence on local, national and international government conservation and management policies. While many journalists are indeed giving more attention to the science of sharks and their importance to healthy oceans, the fact remains that there persists the initial media frenzy immediately after an attack, the interspersion of shock headlines, and *Jaws* continues to be the touchstone for media reporting. An increase in conservation awareness by an enlightened public ensures, however, that sympathy for the victim of an attack matches consideration for the shark.

Beryl Francis

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